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Watch Officer Analyzed FEMA Web 2.0 Strategy

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The Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Watch Center provides 24/7 situational awareness for DHS and FEMA leadership before during and after catastrophic events. As a watch officer, Samuel Johnson is well versed in the correlation of information to create a common operational picture.

This and his previous positions with FEMA have enabled him to observe some of the barriers to communication that often hinder local, state, and federal officials from having access to complete information and obtaining shared situational awareness needed to make key decisions.

His thesis, "Improved Web 2.0 Strategy for FEMA to Enable Collaboration and a Shared Situational Awareness Across the Whole of Community," examined how the agency could more fully utilize social media to engage all relevant partners during an event in order to establish a more comprehensive operating picture.

"This thesis has applicability throughout the homeland security enterprise," Johnson wrote. "Every agency within it is considered a part of the Whole of Community."

1) Johnson's thesis begins with a scenario illustrating how traditional methods of communications may lead to a splintered operating picture among varied agencies and how Web 2.0 technology could mitigate that shortcoming. Social media has been utilized by FEMA's Office of Public Affairs, yet not at the operational level where phone calls and e-mails remain the norm.

To answer whether Web 2.0 technology could improve a common operating picture, Johnson traces the history of the terms 'situational awareness,' 'collaboration' and 'shared situational awareness' while also examining what Web 2.0 is, how agencies are using it and outlining FEMA's strategy.

The research included case studies on the Transportation Security Administration's Idea Factory as well as Ushahidi, a non-profit tech company specializing in free and open source software for information collection, visualization and interactive mapping. The latter was born from political unrest in Kenya in 2008 and was used to map reports of violence. TSA's Idea Factory is a Web-based tool that was used to enable collaboration between TSA employees and their leadership. The research further analyzes commercial tools such as Adobe Connect and Go-To-Meeting that enable interaction from disparate locales.

2) The research expanded Johnson's understanding of Web 2.0 and social media, and how to better harness technology to meet FEMA's "Whole of Communities" ethos and has helped him in his role as a watch officer.

"What helped me was this is part of what I do in the real world, it's not just an academic exercise," he said.

3) As he researched his thesis, FEMA established an initiative similar to his topic called the FEMA Think Tank, which enables stakeholders to communicate online and through monthly conference calls with FEMA administration that focuses on improving preparedness and response.

Johnson is working with FEMA's Office of External Affairs to improve the tools available to FEMA Watch Centers to monitor social media and other operational functions. Also, the agency is studying how the government may interact with social mapping sites such as Ushahidi, which is all-volunteer produced.

"It's something we are discussing here via exercises and table top discussions," Johnson said. "How do we tie this in from an operations and emergency management standpoint? How can emergency managers better leverage social media?"

Further, FEMA is conducting privacy analyses looking at how watch centers use social media, what's allowed and what is not allowed in terms of privacy laws. And, with more and more emergency managers writing blogs and using Twitter, Johnson said the agency is enlisting such trusted voices to gain a better operating picture.

If we can leverage social media, we can really connect the 'Whole Community,' Johnson said. "It's a great time to do something different to connect the public and private sector along with non-government organizations in one forum where we can openly discuss the best ways to respond to emergencies."

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